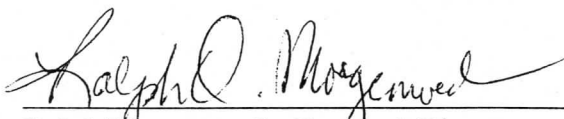


Environmental Action Statement

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Region 6
Denver, Colorado

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I have established the following administrative record and have determined that the action of implementing the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge Hunting Plan is found not to have significant environmental effects as determined by the attached Finding of No Significant Impact and Environmental Assessment.



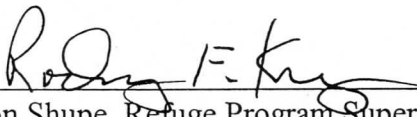
Ralph Morgenweck, Regional Director
Region 6, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

12/30/03
Date



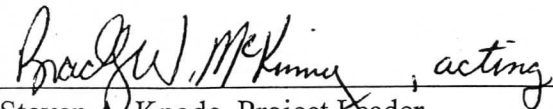
Richard A. Coleman, Ph.D
Regional Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System
Refuges and Wildlife

12/30/03
Date



Ron Shupe, Refuge Program Supervisor (Acting)
National Wildlife Refuge System
Refuges and Wildlife

12/22/03
Date



Steven A. Knode, Project Reader
Crescent Lake/North Platte NWR Complex

12-19-03
Date

Finding of No Significant Impact

Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge- Hunting Plan

Four alternatives for the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge Hunting Plan were assessed as to their effectiveness in achieving the Refuge's purposes and their impact on the human environment.

Alternative 1- No Action Alternative which would continue the current hunting program unchanged; Alternative 2- would discontinue hunting on the Refuge; Alternative 3- open the Refuge to the taking of all species allowed by Nebraska State Hunting Regulations; and the preferred Alternative 4- will expand Hunting Opportunities within limitations to refuge specific regulations. The alternatives were assessed in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Environmental Assessment and the Hunting Plan. Based on this assessment and comments received, I have selected the preferred Alternative 4 for implementation.

The preferred alternative was selected because it best meets the purposes of the Refuge to reserve and set apart as a refuge and breeding ground for birds and wild animals. The preferred alternative will also provide for public wildlife-dependant recreational opportunities as defined in the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997.

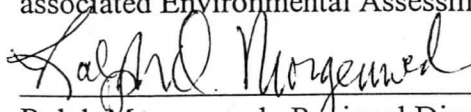
I find that the preferred alternative is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2) (C) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Accordingly, the preparation of an environmental impact statement on the proposed action is not required.

Based on public comment and Service review of the Draft Hunting Plan, the following changes are noted to the Hunting Plan:

During the public comment period there were no comments that necessitated changes to the hunting plan. Responses were limited to inquisitory replies and were overwhelmingly in support of the hunting plan as drafted.

The following is a summary of anticipated environmental effects from implementation of the preferred alternative:

- *The preferred alternative will not adversely impact endangered or threatened species or their associated habitat.
- *The preferred alternative will not adversely impact archaeological or historical resources.
- *The preferred alternative will not adversely impact wetlands nor does the plan call for structures that could be damaged by or that would significantly influence the movement of flood water.
- *The preferred alternative will not have a disproportionately high or adverse human health or environmental effect on minority or low-income populations.
- *The State of Nebraska has been notified and given the opportunity to review the Hunting Plan and associated Environmental Assessment.



Ralph Morgenweck, Regional Director
Region 6, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

12/30/03
Date

**Environmental Assessment
Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge
Hunting Plan**

Purpose For Action

The purpose of management of the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is to facilitate the restoration, maintenance, and management of natural diversity including endangered species. Additionally, the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) facilitates continuity of management, and effective decision-making to achieve these ends. The Plan is intended to provide long-range guidance for the management of this Refuge based on careful consideration of the physical and biological characteristics of the land-base. It is designed to facilitate achievement of the Service mission and Refuge goals which center on the protection and enhancement of wildlife and their habitats and the provision of appropriate compatible public recreation. The Service has responsibility for stewardship over species that occupy Service lands and for the protection of cultural resources on these lands. Crescent Lake NWR, located in west-central Nebraska is a unique and ecologically important component of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1931 for the following purpose;

*“ . . . to provide as a refuge and breeding ground for birds
and wild animals, . . . ”*

The CPP for the Refuge was approved on August 19, 2002. Through this planning process, which included comments from the general public and other stakeholders, it was determined that hunting lacks significant environmental effects and is compatible with the Refuge purposes. The CCP specifically identified expanding waterfowl hunting opportunities. Through the process of developing a hunting plan, to accommodate the CCP, other species have been identified to expand hunting opportunities on the Refuge. The proposed Hunting Plan is to serve as a step down management plan to the Refuge CCP.

Need For Action

This action addresses both the needs of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) to meet its trust responsibilities and the needs of the local community and the general public.

To meet its trust responsibilities, the Service needs to provide a diversity of quality habitats for wildlife and protection for the species using these habitats. The Service also needs to ensure that all recreational activities occurring on the Refuge are compatible with the purposes for which the Refuge was established.

The needs of the public, primarily the local area communities, are for a place where traditional recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, and wildlife observation can be enjoyed. Both the Crescent Lake NWR Draft Hunting Plan and this Environmental Assessment are available for public review and comment prior to the issuance of a final Hunting Plan.

Alternatives Including Preferred Alternative

This section will describe the alternative analysis for developing the Crescent Lake NWR Hunting Plan. The preferred alternative will be outlined in extensive detail in the Draft Hunting Plan. The following alternatives are those that the Service analyzed during the planning phase of the Hunting Plan.

Alternative 1: Continuation of the Current Hunting Program (No Action)

The no action alternative would continue the hunting program as is, which would include hunting of white tail and mule deer, pheasant, and grouse in accordance with State regulations. This alternative would result in not complying with our CCP's objective to "Expand hunting to include limited waterfowl hunting" (Crescent Lake CCP-pg. 57).

Alternative 2: Discontinue Hunting on the Refuge

This alternative would not comply with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 by not providing opportunities to the defined six wildlife-dependant recreational uses on National Wildlife Refuges (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation). By implementing this alternative it would result in not complying with our CCP's objectives to "Expand hunting to include limited waterfowl hunting" (Crescent Lake CCP-pg. 57).

Alternative 3: Open the Refuge to the taking of all species allowed by Nebraska State Hunting Regulations

This alternative would open everything up to hunting on the Refuge as it is in the surrounding area as defined by Nebraska State Hunting Regulations. The Refuge would not have refuge specific regulations for hunting on the Refuge. This would severely limit the Refuge's ability to manage the Refuge in accordance with the approved CCP and its defined objectives. It would limit Refuge managements ability to ensure refuge visitors are enjoying a quality hunting experience and that hunting is carried out in manner compatible with other refuge public uses.

Alternative 4: Expand Hunting Opportunities within limitations to refuge specific regulations (Preferred Alternative)

This alternative is the Service's preferred alternative that would enable Crescent Lake NWR to manage refuge resources and public uses in accordance with statutory authorities. This alternative would give the Refuge the ability to comply with the CCP by expanding hunting opportunities. This alternative would comply with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 by ensuring visitors the priority public use opportunities defined for National Wildlife Refuges within the Act. This alternative would allow the Refuge to expand hunting opportunities to those game species that can be determined to have huntable populations on the Refuge as determined by population surveys conducted by Refuge staff. This alternative will give refuge management the ability to ensure that a quality hunt experience is enjoyed by refuge hunters and that hunting is carried out in a manner that is compatible with other Refuge public uses.

This alternative includes the following management strategies that would carry out the Refuge Hunting Program:

- *Development and implementation of a new Hunting Plan guided by the CCP and this alternative action.
- *Concurrence with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) in the development of the Hunting Plan.
- *Public comments on the Hunting Plan.
- *Coordination with the NGPC in collecting harvest data for those species hunted on the Refuge.

- *Monitoring of wildlife populations that might be affected by hunting or other public use activities.
- *Ensure that all new hunting activities are compatible with the Refuge purpose and mission and are carried out in a compatible manner.
- *Ensure that hunters are afforded a quality hunting experience with regards to preventing excessive hunter numbers, maintaining environmental aesthetics, and ensuring hunt quality with regards to game availability and hunter/visitor safety.
- *Ensure that hunting activities do not negatively impact other Refuge public uses.
- *All areas currently closed to public use will not be affected by hunting activities.

Affected Environment

Crescent Lake Refuge lies on the southwestern edge of the 19,300 square-mile Nebraska Sandhills, the largest sand dune area in the Western Hemisphere and one of the largest grass-stabilized regions in the world. The Sandhills are characterized by rolling, vegetated hills and inter-dunal valleys which are oriented in a northwest to southeast direction. Many shallow lakes and marshes are interspersed in the lower valleys. Native grasses predominate. Wildlife diversity, except large ungulates and their predators, is relatively unchanged since early settlement.

Approximately 177,000 acres of open water lakes, shallow marsh and fens, and nearly 1,130,000 acres of wet meadows remain in the Sandhills. Most wetlands are freshwater; about 10 percent are alkaline. They range in size from 1 to 2,300 acres, but 80 percent are less than 10 acres (LaGrange 1997). Many wetlands have been drained in attempts to increase hay production. Estimates of the amount drained range from 15 percent (McMurtrey and Craig 1969) to 46 percent (USFWS and CWS 1986). Wetland drainage continues to this day (Hrabik 1989).

Under the Fish and Wildlife Service's (1994) "ecosystem approach to resource management," Crescent Lake Refuge is within the Platte-Kansas Rivers Ecosystem.

Climate of the Sandhills is characteristic of the central Great Plains - cold winters, hot summers, and frequent thunderstorms from spring to late summer. Annual precipitation ranges from 17 to 23 inches (Wilhite and Hubbard 1989), and is coupled with high evapo-transpiration rates. The Refuge has operated an official weather station since 1935. Precipitation on the Refuge averages 16.8 inches, and temperatures have ranged from minus 46 to 109 degrees Fahrenheit. Since 1976, relatively high precipitation has resulted in positive net moisture balances (annual precipitation minus open pan evaporation) in most years.

All lands around the Refuge are in private ownership except for a small ranch on the west boundary purchased in 1984 by The Nature Conservancy for preservation of the blowout penstemon (an endangered plant). The only other public land in Garden County is Ash Hollow State Historical Park, 50 miles to the southeast.

The major recreation activities in the area include hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing. The existing recreational activities occurring on the Refuge are not necessarily unique to the area; however, with the private land holdings, public access can be difficult.

Approximately 80 acres of trees are on the Refuge, most of which were planted by the CCC in the 1930s. Trees add diversity but, with the exception of cottonwoods and willows, are not a normal part of the Sandhills Prairie. There is no active management and the acreage is steadily declining through natural mortality.

A full description of the Refuge, its resources, and its economic setting are included in the Crescent Lake CCP.

Environmental Consequences

Alternative 1: Continuation of the Current Hunting Program (No Action)

***Wildlife and Habitat:**

This action would have no change of impacts as it is a continuation of current practices and impacts would remain the same.

***Wilderness Management:**

This action would have no change of impacts as it is a continuation of current practices and impacts would remain the same.

***Public Use:**

This action would have no change of impacts as it is a continuation of current practices and impacts would remain the same. This alternative would inhibit the Refuge's ability to comply with its CCP and the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 with regards to wildlife-dependant recreational opportunities.

***Cultural and Paleontological Resources:**

This action would have no change of impacts as it is a continuation of current practices and impacts would remain the same.

***Air and Water Quality:**

This action would have no change of impacts as it is a continuation of current practices and impacts would remain the same.

***Socio-Economic Conditions:**

This action would have no change of impacts as it is a continuation of current practices and impacts would remain the same.

Alternative 2: Discontinue Hunting on the Refuge

***Wildlife and Habitat:**

This action could have some adverse effects on wildlife and habitat as it could affect wildlife population dynamics on and off the Refuge. The CCP does list as an objective to "Maintain a healthy deer population (300-400) through habitat management, population monitoring, and, if needed, harvest regulation at the Refuge level" (Crescent Lake CCP, page 52). A strategy listed under this CCP Objective is to "Cooperate with the State in area-wide management strategies and annual evaluations of Refuge hunting regulations" (Crescent Lake CCP, page 52). This action would inhibit our ability to comply with these objectives and strategies defined in the CCP.

***Wilderness Management:**

This action would have no impact on wilderness management.

***Public Use:**

This action would have an adverse effect on the Refuge public use program as well as public relations for the Refuge. It would also have a negative impact on the Service's ability to work with the state on wildlife management issues. It would not comply with the Refuge CCP and the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 with regards to providing wildlife-dependant recreational opportunities when they are compatible with the Refuge purpose and mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

***Cultural and Paleontological Resources:**

This action would have no impact on cultural and paleontological resources.

***Air and Water Quality:**

This action would have no impact on air and water quality.

***Socio-Economic Conditions:**

The Refuge provides access to public lands for hunting purposes which is a tourism draw for Western Nebraska. This action would severely impact the Socio-economic conditions of the surrounding communities by denying hunting opportunities for the many local and out of state hunters that utilize the Refuge.

Alternative 3: Open the Refuge to the taking of all species allowed by Nebraska State Hunting Regulations

***Wildlife and Habitat:**

The NGPC oversees the states wildlife resources and manages them with proper wildlife management procedures ensuring a proper balance between wildlife, habitat, and the needs of the public. This would have some effect on wildlife with regards to lead poisoning as it would inhibit the Refuges ability to prohibit lead shot while hunting on the Refuge. The CCP does state as a strategy to "Open waterfowl hunting on a limited area and prevent conflict with fall and winter fishing" (Crescent Lake CCP, page 57). It also states as an objective to "Provide quality feeding areas... for spring and fall migrating waterfowl" (Crescent Lake CCP, page 47). The CCP does list as an objective to "Maintain a healthy deer population (300-400) through habitat management, population monitoring, and, if needed, harvest regulation at the Refuge level" (Crescent Lake CCP, page 52). This action would prohibit our ability to manage hunting to meet refuge specific goals and objectives with regards to wildlife and habitat management.

***Wilderness Management:**

This action would have no adverse effect upon the wilderness. The only issue is access to the wilderness area which no state regulation would supercede. The NGPC has recently passed a regulation allowing for the quartering of deer in the field, which would make getting a harvested deer out of the Crescent Lake Proposed Wilderness Area a much easier task for hunters.

***Public Use:**

This action would inhibit us from ensuring that hunting is carried out in a compatible manner with refuge purposes. It would also inhibit our ability to ensure that hunters are getting a quality hunting experience on the Refuge. There are some species that are open to hunting, according to State regulations, that we feel would not provide a quality hunt on the Refuge. A few examples would include "Trust" species such as dove, snipe and rail. This would also inhibit the managers ability to ensure that hunting is carried out on the Refuge in a manner compatible with

other Refuge public uses.

***Cultural and Paleontological Resources:**

This would have no adverse effect on cultural and paleontological resources on the Refuge.

***Air and Water Quality:**

This action would have no adverse effect on air or water quality.

***Socio-Economic Conditions:**

This action would have no adverse effect on Socio-economic conditions.

Alternative 4: Expand Hunting Opportunities within limitations to refuge specific regulations (Preferred Alternative)

***Wildlife and Habitat:**

This action would have no significant impact on wildlife populations or habitat on the Refuge. The CCP stipulates that deer hunters should not exceed 150 hunters on any given day. Once that threshold has been met actions must be taken to ensure hunters and visitors to the Refuge are getting a quality experience. Regulations will be implemented to ensure that expanded hunting activities are not negatively impacting refuge resources. This option gives the refuge managers the flexibility to adjust to situations as they arise due to more hunting pressure on the Refuge.

***Wilderness Management:**

This action will have no effect on wilderness management.

***Public Use:**

This action would allow the Refuge to meet its objectives in the CCP to "Expand hunting to include limited waterfowl hunting" (Crescent Lake CCP-pg. 57). This would also better meet the provisions of the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 in providing compatible wildlife-dependant recreational opportunities to the public. This option will also give refuge managers the flexibility to ensure that hunting does not negatively impact other Refuge public uses.

***Cultural and Paleontological Resources:**

This action will have no effect on cultural and paleontological resources.

***Air and Water Quality:**

This action will have no effect on air and water quality.

***Socio-Economic Conditions:**

This action will have no negative effect on Socio-economic conditions. By expanding hunting opportunities and ensuring that all visitors are getting a quality visitor experience to the Refuge it will only improve these conditions.

Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts include impacts on the environment which result from incremental effects of the proposed action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taking place over a period of time. Implementing Alternative 4 (Preferred Alternative) would reduce the potential for cumulative impacts because of the strategic approach to managing the Refuge hunting programs and the consideration of resource conflicts and opportunities within a broad management framework.

Mitigation measures are necessary when effects determined through the NEPA process are anticipated to significantly impact wildlife, habitats, or the human environment. The management activities proposed in Alternative 4 do not produce environmental impacts at significant levels to warrant mitigation measures. The management strategies listed under Alternative 4 will help reduce the risks that any negative effect will occur.

Consultation and Coordination

The Project Leader for the Crescent Lake/North Platte National Wildlife Refuge Complex and the manager of the Crescent Lake Refuge were assigned primary responsibility for planning the CCP in May 1998. In an ongoing effort to involve the local community and officials in the CCP process, an open house/scoping session was held in Oshkosh on July 16, 1998, to inform the public of the planning process and to seek ideas on Refuge programs and issues. About 150 invitations were mailed to local and national stakeholders (educators, permittees, neighbors, other agencies, and non-profit organizations). The general public was also invited through widely published / broadcast news releases. Information could also be obtained by contacting the project leader and comments could be submitted in writing. Refuge staff also met personally with the Alliance Office of the NGPC, Wildcat Audubon Society, the North Platte Valley Sportsmans Association, the Alliance Rotary Club, and the Scottsbluff Lions Club to discuss the CCP process. The Hunting Plan is a step-down plan to the CCP. The Hunting Plan will be developed through cooperation with the NGPC and will be put through a public review process before the final is approved.